

Neurodiverse police officers: Learning information about their career experiences – The n-POLICE study

Project that engaged with autistic police officers and staff and those with ADHD, through a survey and interviews to explore their career experiences.

Key details

Lead institution	University of Leicester
Police region	East Midlands
Collaboration and partnership	• Dr Michelle O'Reilly, University of Leicester (corresponding researcher). Contact the researcher • Dr Samuel Tromans, University of Leicester • Dr Alison Drewett, Loughborough University The project received support from the National Police Autism Association and was funded by the Wellcome Trust (Pump Primer Award).
Level of research	Professional/work based
Project start date	August 2022

Research context

Autistic people and those with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) experience inequalities in gaining and retaining employment. However, there is a limited understanding of specific career experiences. Our understanding of autism and ADHD in policing has been mostly generated from the point of view of police interacting with offenders, witnesses and victims rather than autistic/ADHD police officers and staff.

To assure equality in policing, for those that work for the police as well as the communities that engage with them, it is important that autistic police officers and staff and those with ADHD are supported. Neurodiversity within policing can benefit organisations, and yet we know little of the experiences of autistic police officers and staff or those with ADHD to create guidelines to support them to do well in their career. We therefore need to understand the occupation from their point of view.

We found that autistic police officers and staff found it difficult to disclose this to their peers and managers because of stigma and fear of judgement, and that reasonable adjustments were sometimes difficult to acquire or were not appropriately implemented. We also found that they encountered a range of difficulties in their role, some due to the features of autism or ADHD, and some because of organisational issues. Importantly, the participants believed they were an asset to policing and had strengths that others may not have, especially when supported to do the job.

Police culture was a significant influence on the way in which the participants experienced their work and more needs to be done to understand the challenges faced and to make a difference.

Research methodology

We first conducted a survey with the help of the National Police Autism Association (NPAA), and reached 117 autistic police officers and staff and those with ADHD. We also interviewed 37 of those survey respondents for a more detailed understanding of these issues.

For the survey, 117 members of the NPAA responded to our request. This included 66 officers and staff who were autistic and 51 who had ADHD, 17 of whom experienced both autism and ADHD (AuDHD). It was also the case that co-occurring mental health conditions were prevalent among this group, which is consistent with the wider literature on autism and ADHD (see Lai and others, 2019). For example, 49% of our respondents experienced anxiety and 36% experienced depression.

For the interview part of our study, we used reflective interviews as the type of qualitative data collection tool. Reflective interviews allow a focus on specific experiences by encouraging participants to reflect on specific areas of their lives (Roulston, 2010). In total, 37 officers and staff who had participated in the survey consented to participate in an interview – 26 officers and 11 staff, 18 women and 19 men. Of those, 22 were autistic, 13 were ADHD, and two preferred not to

specify.

We used reflexive thematic analysis (see Braun and Clarke, 2022) to create patterns from the data and to examine similarities of experience. Using this method of analysis allowed us to see what the common issues were for the participants, including the ways in which they felt supported, and areas they believed needed some improvement.

Summary of findings

This project was completed in December 2024.

O'Reilly M, Tromans S and Drewett A. (In press). The benefits and challenges of autistic police force employees and those with ADHD supporting neurodivergent colleagues and neurodivergent victims, witnesses and suspects. *Police Practice and Research: An International Journal*. [Read open access article](#)

O'Reilly M, Tromans S and Drewett A. (In press). Navigating a jeopardising career on the thin blue line of ability vs disability: Neurodivergent police experiences at work. *The Police Journal: Theory, Practice and Principles*. [Read open access article](#)

O'Reilly M and others. (2025). [The experiences of mid-career disclosure of Autism and ADHD diagnosis by UK police officers and staff](#). *Policing: An International Journal*, volume 48, issue 5, pages 1031–1046.

Tromans S and others. (2023). A survey of the workplace experiences of police force employees who are Autistic and/or have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder. *British Journal of Psychiatry Open*, volume 9, issue 4, article e123. [Read open access article](#)

Research participation

- We appreciate the support of the NPAA in recruitment to the study.
- 117 officers and staff who were autistic, had ADHD, or both, participated in the survey phase of our work. Of those, 37 agreed to be interviewed – 26 officers and 11 staff, with 22 being autistic, 13 having ADHD (seven experienced both), and two preferred not to tell us.

- Not all were formally diagnosed, as five of them were on a waiting list or had chosen not to pursue a diagnosis. Of those interviewed, 18 were women and 19 were men, none specified another gender. Policing experience also varied, ranging from two to 39 years with the police, but most had more than 10 years service.

References

Braun V and Clarke V. (2022) 'Thematic Analysis: A Practical Guide'. London: Sage.

Lai MC and others. (2019). [Prevalence of co-occurring mental health diagnoses in the autism population: A systematic review and meta-analysis](#). The Lancet Psychiatry, volume 6, issue 10, pages 819–829.

Roulston K. (2010). 'Reflective Interviewing'. London: Sage.

Additional resources

[Project website](#)